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Confronting the New Israeli Government



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Confronting the New Israeli Government

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The results of the recent Israeli elections last November led to a fundamental change in the Israeli political and partisan map, with the right and the extreme right winning a majority in the Knesset of 64 seats out of 120. This victory allowed Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party to form the government in coalition with the "Religious Zionism" list, which includes the three most radical and racist Israeli parties, and with the religious fundamentalist movements "Shas" and "United Torah Judaism." This government is the most right-wing and extreme government in Israel's history. For the first time, the "Religious Zionism" movement won a large number of seats and became, with its fourteen members of the Knesset, the third list in the parliament. This victory gave its leaders Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the "Religious Zionism" party, Itamar Ben-Gvir, head of the "Jewish Power" party, and Avi Maoz, leader of the "Noam" party, the power to dictate their conditions to Netanyahu so that he could establish a stable government. The price that Netanyahu has paid will be at the expense of the Palestinians primarily and at the expense of the image and nature of Israel, its political system, and certain sectors of the Israeli society.

The current composition of the government undoubtedly demonstrates that it will work against any Palestinian aspiration for an independent state in the immediate and long-term. The Likud party and its leader, Netanyahu, embrace the principle of "conflict management" and "economic peace" contained in the Trump's "Deal of the Century," which was originally drafted in full harmony with the position of Netanyahu and the Israeli right. Netanyahu completely rejects the withdrawal to the 1967 borders, and refuses to divide Jerusalem or "give up" any part of it on the grounds that "full and united Jerusalem is the capital of Israel," as stated in the Nation-State Law enacted by the Knesset in 2018. He wants to impose Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and the settlements in the West Bank, while retaining in Israel's hands full and absolute security control over all of historic Palestine. The Likud and the current government reject the return of any Palestinian refugees within Israel's borders, and consider Arab countries responsible for them. In conclusion, the Likud and the government consider that the conflict is not over part of historic Palestine, but over all of it, and that it is an existential conflict, not just over borders.

The tripartite "religious-Zionist" list is more hardline than the Likud, rejecting any political process that allows the establishment of a Palestinian state that its electoral platform calls a "state of terror." It wishes to "impose Israeli sovereignty over all areas of the Land of Israel," or historic Palestine.

In reality, we are dealing with an extreme right-wing government that engraves on its banner the killing of the idea of a political settlement based on the two-state solution on the borders of the fourth of June 1967. Instead, it will seek with all its strength to permanently block this idea. All the coalition parties, especially the trio of Netanyahu, Smotrich and Ben Gvir, do not even support maintaining the bad status quo as it is, but will escalate things further. They certainly pose a grave and immediate threat to Palestinian national rights and aspirations.

This paper aims to shed light on the changes taking place in the Israeli policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict after the formation of the new government, the extent of its threat and impact on the reality in the Palestinian territories and on the overall national cause. But it mainly addresses what Palestinians can and should do to avoid the risks resulting from the developing threat and preserve national rights. It takes into consideration the magnitude of the domestic Israeli, regional and international opposition to the fledgling government's policy.

Fundamental changes in Israel's political system:

The coalition agreements signal the birth of a "new Israel," one that is more extreme, racist and obscurantist and far removed even from the democracy that Israel used to claim for itself in front of Western societies. The agreement with Ben Gvir stipulates that he will take over the Ministry of Public Security with broad powers renaming it the "Ministry of National Security." It includes control over the Green Police, Green Patrols, the Law Enforcement Authority on the Territories, and the "Border Guard" unit operating in the West Bank, which is normally under the responsibility of the Central Command of the occupation army. It allows the establishment of a large national guard. His party holds the Ministry of Development of the Negev and the Galilee, to which was added "national immunity," with an annual budget of 2 billion shekels. The Directorate of Planning under his party's control is responsible for the "normalization" of settlements; i.e., placing them under the control of the various relevant ministries rather than the army and the defense ministry. The Ministry of Heritage is responsible for all archaeological sites in Israel, as well as those in the West Bank. It was also agreed to enact a law repealing the "disengagement" law and to legalize the settlement of Homesh, which was dismantled and recently returned to by settlers. Other settlements outposts will be legalized, including Avitar, located on Beita village, and more than 60 other outposts they call "Young Settlements" belonging to the "Hilltop Youth" gangs.

Then came the agreement with Smotrich's "Religious Zionism" party to take over as alternate finance minister, the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption and the Ministry of National Missions. A minister from his party will be placed at the Ministry of Defense and will be responsible for the Civil Administration as well as "Office of the Coordinator" in the Palestinian territories, the Settlement Brigade, the National Service and the Preparatory Schools for the army thereby removing them from the responsibility of the army. The minister in charge of all these missions will be in direct coordination with the prime minister. The party holds the chairmanship of the Special Committee on the Constitution, Law, the Judiciary and the Religious Service. He will also chair the Reform Committee that leads the judiciary reform.

Thus, Smotrich can in effect implement his annexation program by transferring the powers of the Civil Administration out of the Ministry of Defense to the civilian departments of the government, so that the settlements are placed outside the responsibility of the army and treated as areas located inside Israel. In this case, Israeli law would apply to them, which means a silent or "de facto" annexation that Smotrich urges. In other words, the settlement enterprise and creeping annexation will proceed at a rapid pace.

The coalition agreements that enabled Netanyahu to establish his government are tied to the enactment of new laws and the amendment of others, including basic laws. The so-called "Smotrich Law" allows him to separate the Civil Administration and supervise the settlers and the areas they occupy, i.e. a large part of Area C, from the Ministry of Defense and place them under his supervision and the responsibility of the Prime Minister. This could include the appointment of the head of the Civil Administration and the head of the Coordination office.

The new laws and coalition agreements that inform the government's platform have significant implications for the nature of Israel's political system. The platform reflects an extreme racist ideology

that rejects the idea of a political settlement. One of the most important paragraphs of the government's program states that "the Jewish people have an exclusive and unquestionable right to all areas of the Land of Israel. The government will promote and develop settlement in all parts of the Land of Israel — in the Galilee, the Negev, the Golan, Judea and Samaria." This provision does not at all observe the existence of the Palestinian people or any of their rights, does not abide by any agreement or any of the provisions or norms of international law, including those governing the role and powers of the occupying power. Instead, it will seek a silent *de facto* annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Nor does it care about the status of the Palestinian Authority (PA) or even the possibility of its collapse. It does not give weight to coordination with the PA or cooperation with it in solving problems on the ground.

What would a Palestinian confrontational strategy look like?

The Israeli government's program and the coalition agreements that were implemented even before the government took the oath of allegiance in parliament do not allow any room for the Palestinians to cooperate with this government, appease it, or be patient with it. It has become clear that the Palestinians cannot deal with the new government like its predecessors or continue Palestinian-Israeli coordination. This government undermines all the foundations of Palestinian-Israeli relations and poses a threat to Palestinian national rights and interests. It is natural that we should define our relationship with the Israeli Government on the basis of Palestinian interests. In this context, it seems only logical that we should be in a clash with this government. This conclusion is derived from the fact that the aggressive and destructive policies of the new government leave no room for any other alternative. The new government seeks to destroy all the foundations and possibilities of a peaceful solution and a political settlement of the conflict on the basis of the two-state solution on the borders of June 1967. We are in fact in a race against time. The changes that could occur on the ground, politically and legally, will be irreversible over time.

The inevitable confrontation with the Israeli government's policy and aggressive measures should take place within the framework of careful Palestinian planning and creative initiatives. It should go beyond the usual demands and appeals addressed to the international community and various other parties. We cannot afford to waste more time and maintain a waiting policy. We must take the initiative. Such an initiative should be built around the following ten steps that should constitute the Palestinian response to the new Israel.

First, we urgently need the Palestinian leadership in the PLO, and President Mahmoud Abbas in particular, as well as the leadership of Hamas, to take a definitive decision to begin the process of building national unity. All Palestinian forces are required to agree on a joint program based on the demand of expelling the occupation and establishing an independent Palestinian state on the borders of June 1967. Disagreement over tactical issues should have by now narrowed to the farthest extent. Unity could begin by activating the PLO's "interim leadership" framework, which includes all factions as well as the PLO Executive Committee and some independents, to reassure Hamas that it is part of the unified political reaction of the Palestinian people until legislative elections are held and the Palestine National Council is reconstituted. A national unity government could be formed and it could start its work by preparing for general elections. In order to increase flexibility and create an atmosphere of trust between the various parties, the separation between the legislative and presidential elections may be acceptable to the Fatah leadership, meaning that no date is set soon for the election of the president, and to give a chance for unity within the framework of the legislative body and the government. This gradual unfolding of the election process is wise given the prevailing concern about the candidacy of Marwan Barghouti against President Mahmoud Abbas.

Second, we must break free from the shackles of Oslo, which no longer exists in the Israeli government's program. The announcement of the suspension of compliance with some of the obligations of Oslo that Israel cares about is consistent with the decisions of the Palestinian Central Council, such as the cessation of security coordination that has already been announced, which must be adhered to in full. Consideration should also be given to the transformation of the current PA, the one created by Oslo, to a PLO-led government of the State of Palestine in order to rehabilitate that organization, which must be reconstituted and activated as a result of a general election.

Third, we must call upon the Arab League to reemphasize the Arab Peace Initiative and to urge the Arab states to stop normalization with Israel in the light of its violation of international agreements. In this context, it is necessary to restore coordination and alliance relations with Arab countries within the framework of the League, with a special focus on influential Arab countries that are more closely tied to the Palestinian cause, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, in order to ensure the return of Arab financial and political support for the Palestinian people. This component of the Palestinian initiative can be built on the tripartite summit held in Egypt between President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, King Abdullah II, and President Mahmoud Abbas on 17 January 2023. The Palestinian leadership must do everything possible to restore Arab solidarity and unify the Arab position in support of the Palestinian cause on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative. Encouraging in this context is the Saudi position that rejects normalization with Israel as long as there is no real progress towards the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

Fourth, the PA must embark a large-scale international diplomatic campaign to secure international recognition of the State of Palestine on the borders of June 1967. The real international response to Israel's annexation measures should be to confirm the recognition of the State of Palestine as a full member state under occupation and to stop unilateral Israeli measures in the occupied Palestinian territories. This should be taken in the context of the General Assembly resolution 19/67, which recognizes the State of Palestine as a non-member state of the United Nations. Security Council resolution 2334 sets a clear and unequivocal boundary between the occupied territories within the 1967 borders and Israel and considers everything Israel is doing in the occupied territories illegal and contrary to international law. This should be done despite the fact that UN resolutions remain unfortunately symbolic and do not rise to the level of actual pressure on Israel. It should be noted that some countries and private companies boycotted settlements based on such international decisions and resolutions. In this context, it is important to recruit support for this effort from the Palestinian and Arab diaspora communities.

Fifth, we should appeal to all international organizations concerned with the conflict, including human rights organizations, and focus in particular on the Human Rights Council, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC), to issue political and legal positions against the Israeli occupation and its violations and to prosecute Israel and its political and security leaders for the crimes they commit against the Palestinian people.

Sixth, we must implement the decision of the Palestinian Central Council to freeze recognition of Israel and to link such recognition to an Israeli recognition of the right of our people to an independent state in the territories occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem. Such a position represents an important moral step, a new political basis for dealing with the occupying authorities and a ground for future political negotiations. Most importantly, the Palestinian leadership must adapt to the difficult and painful reality that will most likely emerge, including enduring sanctions that Israel has begun to talk about simply for going to the ICJ to demand a legal advisory opinion on the continued Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories.

Seventh, the Palestinian initiative should take advantage of the contradiction that has begun to appear in public between the position of the US administration and that of the new Israeli government. In

particular, we should pay clear attention to the US warnings against any Israeli policy that may undermine the two-state solution and the US opposition to the policy of settlement expansion. This US position was evident in Secretary of State Antony Blinken's speech at the conference of the moderate Jewish organization, J Street, in Washington on 4 December 2022. We should also take note of the apparent contradiction between a large portion of the Jewish community in the US and the Netanyahu government on political matters related to annexation in the West Bank and on domestic issues related to religious imposition and undermining the foundations of democracy and liberalism in Israel. Moreover, we must work intensively in the American arena through those bodies in charge of the American file as well as the Palestinian, Arab and Islamic diaspora communities. We need to develop relations with the members of Congress of Palestinian and Arab descent to influence the position of the US Administration and Congress and provide mechanisms that could allow for American pressure on Israel, and in international forums.

Eighth, we should work intensively in the Israeli arena, capitalize on the unprecedented internal division in Israel, and coordinate intensively with the opposition to Netanyahu and the Palestinian citizens of Israel to contribute to the mobilization of the Israeli public opinion against the government and its policies. These policies pose a threat to the entire region, including Israel. The goal should be to generate popular pressure on the government to stop the process of annexation and settlement expansion. Twenty human rights organizations in Israel have warned against the annexation policy that the Israeli government intends to implement, out of interest in maintaining the State of Israel as a "Jewish" state, that is, with a large Jewish majority. Moreover, 10 Israeli organizations have expressed willingness to cooperate with international bodies to criminalize this Israeli annexationist policy.

Ninth, the Palestinian factions and popular forces must develop mechanisms and programs of large-scale non-violent popular resistance to allow for significant popular participation in hindering and disrupting the settlement program. We saw examples of this resistance in Beita and in the face of the threat of forced evacuation of Khan al-Ahmar and in the previous examples such as the village of Bab al-Shams. Since a majority of settlers comes to the occupied territories to obtain economic privileges, disrupting their daily life should be our goal. In this context, cooperation can be made with Israeli organizations that oppose the policy of annexation and settlement construction and support the rights of the Palestinian people.

Tenth, we should design a Palestinian development plan that aims at strengthening the steadfastness of the Palestinian citizens on their land, especially in Area C, which will be targeted more than ever. This plan should provide farmers and Bedouins with the means of resilience and survival, such as access to water, energy and animal feed. It should propose projects for land reclamation and cultivation, especially in the Jordan Valley, and provide financial incentives, whether by the government or international donors in cooperation with the government.

These are the main components of a Palestinian confrontational strategy based on on-ground activities as well as political and diplomatic offensives that seek to reshape the current relationship with the occupation authorities. The strategy aims to build on the PA decision to suspend security coordination. But it is not restricted to PA efforts. Factions, political parties, popular organizations, and civil society organizations, should join forces to carry out this national confrontational strategy.

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